

Immigration politics, slavery talk: the case for a class perspective

The UK Modern Slavery Bill, and UK politicians' obsession with immigration, risk undermining political moves to greater solidarity among all those—migrant and non-migrant—experiencing abuse or unfreedom in their employment.

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Entrapment, threats of violence against workers, non-payment of wages and debt-bondage are all alive and well, not only on [Qatar's construction sites](#) but in the [vegetable fields of Lincolnshire](#). The UK's [Modern Slavery Bill \(now Act\)](#) attempts to address such extreme levels of abuse by making it an offence to “[hold] another person in slavery or servitude”, and to “[require them] to perform forced labour”. Moreover, former leader of the Labour Party Ed Miliband gave [a speech on immigration control](#) within the context of the UK's 2015 General Election, in which he promised to “end the epidemic of exploitation” and to “stop people's living standards being undermined by scandalous undercutting”.

On the face of it these are all important initiatives. Yet, the conflation of worker abuse, slavery, and trafficking in legislation such as the Modern Slavery Act may move public attention away from the range of ways in which capitalism itself creates, perpetuates, and relies on forms of unfree labour. As Bridget Anderson and I argued in a [report](#) for the Trades Union Congress (TUC) a decade ago, connecting forced labour/slavery with trafficking/breaking of immigration law can make the unfreedom of workers seem a residual issue, thereby reducing scrutiny of how, or if, employment law is enforced in capitalist workplaces. Instead forced labour and slavery become part of the immigration control agenda; indeed in some cases ‘victims’ of trafficking become viewed as perpetrators of immigration-related offences.

The same year that the TUC report was published, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) brought out a landmark [report](#) on forced labour. The latter omitted any analysis of capitalism and, in particular, of the connections between specific forms of capitalism and unfree labour relations. In a critique of this report, I [argued](#) that the first steps in such an analysis would be to differentiate between the interests of individual businesses and those of capital more generally, as well as the often contradictory agendas of large-scale, monopoly capital and small-scale capital. Such an analysis must also lay plain the relations between capital and the state.

The ILO report missed an opportunity to advocate against those economic relations that produce unfree labour because it implicitly denied the interrelation of government, intergovernmental, and private corporate actions. In the case of employment in the food sector, this included ignoring the conflictive relations between differently positioned businesses in the supply chain, [for example between large retailers and individual small-scale producer/employers](#).

A further major problem with the ILO report was its resort to a discourse of victimhood—[found in the rhetoric of many campaigners against slavery and trafficking today](#), as well as in the Modern Slavery Bill—making for unjustified assumptions about the agency of migrant workers themselves. Paid work carried out by migrant workers was not analysed in relation to the unpaid reproductive work [on which it relied](#), nor did the report seek to understand recruitment or workplace bargaining, cooperation, or conflict from the perspective of individual workers. As a result policy prescriptions emerged that did not reflect or give space to the interests migrant workers may have had, say, in keeping hold of a short-term tie to a particular employer, nor to the apparently small but often meaningful ways in which workplace arrangements may have been subject to continual (re)negotiation by workers.

Ed Miliband's emphasis on "scandalous undercutting" is not so much

aimed at improving employment conditions for all workers as at demonstrating that the Labour Party can sound tough on immigration. The effect, no doubt unintended, may be to stigmatise migrant workers themselves, rather than the companies that are responsible for widespread employment abuse. It is also likely to deflect attention away from the state's complicity in producing [hyper-precarious lives](#) through its hierarchy of immigration-linked socio-legal statuses, a system which it—like Qatar, though in different ways—has proved reluctant to reform. Both states have sought to curtail certain workers' freedoms in the labour market, Qatar through its insistence that workers see out their contracts with the same employer, and the UK through its [refusal since 2012](#) to allow international domestic workers to switch employers.

Instead of using a discourse that singles out international migrant workers, which only adds to existing divisions within workforces, those seeking to fight abusive employment relations and harsh working conditions should work to enhance solidarity among workers of different ethno-national heritages, migration histories, and socio-legal statuses. A more class-based approach, emphasising unity rather than division among dispossessed people—both migrant and non-migrant—is the best chance of directing public attention back to addressing the causes of unfree labour.